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8 LOCATING THE CENTRE: IRISH TRADITIONAL MUSIC AND RE-TRADITIONALISATION AT THE WILLIE CLANCY SUMMER SCHOOL

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The Willie Clancy Summer School is the foremost school for Irish traditional music transmission and practice in the annual Irish traditional music calendar. The particular success of the Willie Clancy Week (as it is more commonly referred to) is the result of a synergy of factors, the reverberations of which resonate in a dialectical exchange with the wider community of Irish traditional music practice. In this essay, two inter-related factors which contribute significantly to the production of cultural authority at the school are considered: Firstly, transmission, and the re-traditionalisation of the processes of transmission at the school and secondly, peripherality and how the location of the school, in the west of Ireland, is a constitutive element in legitimating this re-traditionalising process.

Willie Clancy Week

The Willie Clancy Week offers a ten-day long experience and engagement with Irish traditional music. It takes place annually in Miltown Malbay (henceforth Miltown), a small coastal village on the west coast of County Clare, which itself is sited on the south-west coast of Ireland.¹ Workshop-style classes in the core instruments of Irish traditional music, song and dance are given by ‘masters of the tradition’ to the 1,000 or so participants in the formal and structured part of the school.² In facilitating this number of students, the school utilises a variety of locations in Miltown including schools, public halls and houses. The classes take place in intense four-hour periods every morning from Monday to Saturday during the course of the week and recitals, lectures, concerts and céilís are scheduled for the afternoons and evenings. Students who attend the workshops include children and adult learners from all over Ireland and indeed from international locations near and far. Students engage in an apprenticeship, emerging at the end of the week with an enhanced knowledge of the tradition. The school also, however, attracts a much larger cohort of participants who may not be directly involved in the formal elements of the school’s schedule. These attend to partake in, or soak up, the atmosphere created by the numerous music sessions that take place throughout the many pubs of Miltown and its environs on what would appear at times to be a twenty-four hour basis. Many of these sessions include the workshop teachers — ‘the masters of tradition’ amongst their ranks.

For this community of practice, Willie Clancy, the school’s namesake, is an uilleann piping hero, whose techniques resonate through the generations of pipers that follow. Central to Willie Clancy’s self-narrative is his recourse to the past, driven as he was to recover the music of Garrett Barry, a nineteenth-century west Clare piper, whose music, while unrecorded was mediated to Willie Clancy via his own father, Gilbert Clancy. Willie Clancy’s musical consciousness and reflexive self-identification as tradition-bearer, was in no small part due to his aspiration to repair a perceived broken line of west Clare piping, situated within a much wider discourse of desire for cultural purity.³ During his lifetime, Willie Clancy carefully collected, nurtured and conveyed Garrett Barry’s music into the twentieth century and ‘was by general acclamation given Barry’s hieratic cloak.’⁴ He was driven to make a connection to the grand past of west Clare music, even though ‘that connection wasn’t there to be maintained’ as Garrett Barry died in 1899, nineteen years before Willie Clancy was born.⁵

Willie Clancy's legacy, however, extends far beyond this musical recovery. He nurtured the next generation of musicians and anecdotes of his life are peopled with stories of his good-natured generosity and humour. Thus, his enduring fame emanates from his personality as well as his musical productivity. Designating the school in his honour demonstrates Willie Clancy's affective power and the names 'Willie Clancy' and the 'Willie Clancy Summer School' modulate meanings within an Irish traditional music spectrum that range from uilleann piper to icon. His current status is that of musical icon and star, and while these attributes were embedded in his earthly disposition, they have accrued additional meaning over time since his death, heightened by the additional symbolism of the school's name. The title of the school, rather than fixing one cultural meaning to his name, produces instead a cultural text, whose meaning is created and recreated continuously, in dialogue between the school, its attendees, the community of practising musicians (and in particular pipers), and the media. The commemoration of Willie Clancy's legacy as an uilleann piper then, is central to the organisation of the school. Indeed, the musical and social practices of Willie Clancy during his lifetime are vital to the vision the school both creates and celebrates. Additionally during the week, the national organisation for uilleann piping, Na Píobairí Uilleann, organises what is effectively 'a school within a school', providing not just piping tuition, but also workshops in uilleann-pipe making, maintenance and reed-making.⁶ While all core instruments of the tradition are taught, the uilleann pipes are thus privileged in multiple ways.

Cultural authority

The Willie Clancy Week can be conceptualised as a continuation of the revivalist impulses fundamental to the origins of both the Gaelic League (in 1893) and more recently Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann. Comhaltas, founded in 1951 and still the main organising body for Irish traditional music, continued the Gaelic League model of using competition as a pivotal revivalist technique. This manifested itself in a series of county and provincial fleadhanna (music festivals based on competition) culminating each summer with Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, a major annual event which currently draws over 250,000 people, and has attracted a significant attendance from its inception.⁷ In the early 1970s, the founders of the Willie Clancy Week, like many members of Comhaltas, were concerned with the challenges created by competition and the commercialisation and festivalisation of the Fleadh competition festival itself.

Like other revivalist projects, both nationally and internationally, Comhaltas suffered criticism for negative outcomes created by competition. Fears were expressed about the narrowing of styles within Irish music as 'winning' styles were imitated and peripheral styles were neglected or lost.⁸ An outcome of the competitive process was that cultural authority in many cases was removed from competing practitioners, and transferred to, or co-opted by, a discrete number of revivalists, adjudicators and winners. The contentiousness of cultural authority was not confined to the realm of competition. Commenting on festivalisation and ancillary attendance at the fleadh during the 1960s, Séamus Mac Mathúna deplored the 'guitar-bangers who have 'move[d] in and take[n] over the show' and stated that 'unless drastic changes can be brought about in the next year or so, the fleadh, as we know it, should be scrapped to allow An Comhaltas to get down to more fruitful work for the music'.⁹ Eamon Ó Muirí, ex-chairperson of Comhaltas reiterated this fear, stating that the 'organisation will lose its identity in forests of Beatle hair-dos and fleeces of face-fungus'.¹⁰

These feelings, which represented a widespread anxiety within Comhaltas, engendered by the growing popularity of the Fleadh, were just one of many factors that influenced the establishment of the Willie Clancy Week. Muiris Ó Rócháin, a founding member of the Willie Clancy Week, spoke of the reduction in spaces for music-making at the Fleadh, resulting in the side-lining of musicians and older practitioners in particular. He witnessed first-hand the marginalisation of older musicians during the 1960s and envisaged creating a space for those discomfited by its festivalisation.¹¹ He saw in the Willie Clancy Week the opportunity to actively facilitate older musicians, and to respect and nurture their preserve of cultural authority. In keeping with this vision, older musicians are actively valued at Miltown each year. One-hundred-year-old west Clare musician Marty O'Keefe, resident of New York since 1943, attended his first Willie Clancy week in 1992 and has barely missed a year since. In the summer of 2012, Marty performed at the graveside tribute to Willie Clancy as well as demonstrating his multi-instrumental prowess at both the fiddle and concertina recitals. Representing both a west Clare and Irish-American heritage, Marty and his music were honoured and embraced by those who heard him, and his performances exemplified a core foundational impulse of the school.¹² While Comhaltas was involved with the organisation of the first Willie Clancy Week, the summer school developed independent status after its first year.¹³ Comhaltas perceived itself, as the 'authority, for enlightenment in Irish music', the main organiser of Irish traditional music practice and therefore a key author

in constructing the narrative of Irish traditional music.¹⁴ The authorial intent of the Willie Clancy Week, however, was to privilege local ‘masters of tradition’, valorising Willie Clancy as above all, a west Clare piper and tradition-bearer. Accordingly, there was unwillingness on the part of its organising committee to allow the perceived ‘nationalising’ organisation, Comhaltas to take control.¹⁵

Wider cultural flows also impact the school and create implicit corollaries for the maintenance of cultural authority. Barbara O’Connor and others have argued that ‘global capitalism controls cultural production’, and Ireland’s entry into the EC in 1973 (coinciding with the first Willy Clancy week), clearly signals an engagement with the global market place.¹⁶ If the revival of Irish music, under the aegis of the Gaelic League and later Comhaltas, is perceived as the invention of a national tradition against the denationalising influence of neighbouring Britain, the Willie Clancy Week, as a response, situates itself locally within a global cultural society.

Re-traditionalisation

Diarmuid Ó Giolláin uses the term re-traditionalisation to describe ‘the re-orientation of traditional cultural production to modern contexts.’¹⁷ Increased global cultural flows inform the re-traditionalisation of cultural practices in their places of origin, reinstating axiological modes of continuity as local masters re-traditionalise performance and transmission, utilising locally embedded resources, skills and knowledge. Though Comhaltas performed a vital role in creating new contexts for the performance practice of that music during its first twenty years, its involvement with organised music transmission was minimal during the same period. Consequently, there was a pedagogical gap in the *modus operandi* of Comhaltas. The lynchpin of the Willie Clancy Week is the master-apprentice dyad, in which the school re-traditionalises the process of transmission by privileging the cultural authority of its masters. During the morning workshops, over one hundred individual tutors share their music in classroom settings, opening a point of access to their cultural capital for learners and creating a context that is both traditional and modern.¹⁸ Its traditionality lies in the manner of its explication of Irish traditional music, in which the aural and visual imitation of the master are the primary methods of transmission. However, this traditional explication is swathed in the trimmings of modernity. For example, the concentrated burst of learning is timetabled to fit with the leisure-time schedules of both its participants and tutors, taking place in the first week of the Irish school holidays every July. Digital recording

technology supersedes complete reliance on memory in order to remember tunes and while the orality of the learning experience is central, mediation of this experience through a variety of modes is both commonplace and encouraged: tunes committed to memory during the week, will also be saved as texts, through the use of written notation, and now recording technology. This enables students to revert to the master's detail in the afternoon hours during the week of tuition and more importantly, in the months long after the week has passed.

The early years of the school drew extensively on a group of highly regarded, senior, west Clare tradition-bearers. Bobby Casey, Junior Crehan, John Kelly Senior and Joe Ryan were fiddle players from different parts of west Clare all of whom were involved in a teaching capacity early on.¹⁹ With the exception of Junior Crehan, they were no longer resident in County Clare but made the annual pilgrimage to the school, legitimating the school's and their own west Clare legacy in doing so. The classes of those first years did not offer the clear pedagogical role that teachers at the school today assume, yet the basis of learning by imitation was inherent from the start. This involved the masters 'playing away', an organic process of oral transmission but gradually, teaching has developed over the course of the school, to become much more self-reflexive.²⁰ Denis Liddy, a current teacher at the school, described his youthful experience of these pioneering fiddle classes facilitated by John Kelly Senior and Bobby Casey. In particular, he was struck by the importance attached by the masters, not so much to what they were playing, but to what they were conveying. 'The abiding memory of it was of John Kelly coming in with various versions of the one tune; say, the 'Tempest', "this is Michael Coleman's version, this is my father's version", and then Bobby would have Scully Casey's version.'²¹ The aesthetic references in this system of conveyance, demonstrates the inherent dynamic of the taking up and the handing down of culture. The status afforded to these 'masters of tradition' is not self-ascribed, but predicated instead on recognition of the past. Externally however, the constitutive power of the masters, lay and indeed still lies with 'the group which authorises it and invests it with authority', that is, the organisers of the school and the discourse that the school generates.²² Interestingly, while each of these 'masters' demonstrated their own clearly developed personal style, by virtue of their place of birth and therefore one hundred per cent traceability, their combined idiolects contributed to the moniker 'west Clare style'. The ascription of the moniker 'west Clare style' brings with it a responsibility for the music-making

of future generations which necessitates equal regard for learning appropriately from past generations. Implicit in the musical authenticity stakes of west Clare (or indeed any musical style) is a tension that exists between the sonicity of the past and the acoustics of the future. Within this tension is the perception of west Clare style as geographically rooted in an untainted past and the positioning of these masters as inheritors of that past. As these masters engage in the process of re-traditionalisation, they simultaneously become gate-keepers to the sound of the future.

The imparting of practical knowledge is essential to the teaching process as well as informing a broader system of cultural capital transmission. Field work for this research included attending fiddle classes with James Kelly, son of John Kelly senior, one of the original west Clare masters of tradition.²³ In performative contexts, a fundamental method by which the cultural capital and authority of a master is disseminated resides in their introductions and storytelling narratives, particularly as these relate to tune acquisition and the regime of naming and remembering (and indeed forgetting) tunes. The ultimate story resides in the provenance of any given tune and the master's own placement in that tune's lineage. James Kelly's class narrative strongly acknowledged the presence of his father and other key tradition-bearers. Before teaching the reel 'Last Night's Fun', he recalled how it was popularly played by his father and others along with another tune which he played, but could not recall the name of. James told us that when he was a young boy of ten or eleven years old, 'it got a great going over . . . I remember being in the room listening to that and I thought I was in heaven.'²⁴ This youthful immersion and unbridled access amplifies the authority that he both bears and represents. Visits to James Kelly's classroom from other masters such as Vincent Griffin and Sean Keane, revealed, in the resulting discourse, that both of these players had taught James at various times, further substantiating his lineage.²⁵

Another visiting tutor to the class was a young, American-born fiddle player. In conversation with James, he placed himself into a musical lineage by referencing their shared connection to renowned fiddle player and teacher, Brendan Mulvihill.²⁶ He prefaced one tune 'Give us another' composed by John McFadden, by associating the musical provenance of John McFadden to the Francis O'Neill cylinders.²⁷ These cylinders contain some of the earliest recordings of Irish traditional music, and their referencing validates an authoritative yet seemingly effortless engagement with the tradition. This recourse to past masters is recognition of the authority of tradition and an

acknowledgement of both belonging to it and representing it. Throughout the one hundred plus workshops taking place at the school, the embodied memories of its teaching masters are transformed, by story and anecdote, from the personal to the public domain. In providing this opportunity for the telling and retelling of stories, the school facilitates the transmission of living memory into cultural memory. In the brief instance outlined here, a casual preamble to performance, reveals a deep signification, thick with cultural content, meaning and explication.

Peripherality

Joe Cleary notes that according to the 1966 census, the urban population of the Republic of Ireland exceeded the rural population for the first time.²⁸ The urban traditionalising narratives of Comhaltas, and indeed, the recording industry, depicted depopulating rural areas as at the margins, socially, culturally and musically. According to Cleary, ‘the marginal culture’s destiny is to emulate, it does not inaugurate, initiate or invent’²⁹ However, Philip Bohlman evinces the accrual of power that occurs at the periphery or edge.³⁰ At the time of the Willie Clancy Week’s inception in 1973, both Miltown and Irish traditional music shared a common quality, that of peripherality. The site of the school, in County Clare, embodies both the symbolic location of ‘the west’ and the concept of anchoring a national tradition back in ‘the local’. The gathering of Clare masters of traditional music in Miltown, explicitly enunciated ‘the local’ through style and physical location with a clear remit that through teaching they would share the cultural capital they embodied. Drawing on the success of the national revival of Irish traditional music, spearheaded by the Gaelic League, piping clubs and Comhaltas, the Willie Clancy Week re-traditionalised the local, by moving cultural production, once perceived to be peripheral, back to the centre. Accordingly, the periphery – centre boundary of Irish traditional music converges in Miltown as attention shifts to the constitutive structures and relations of a small town in the animation of Irish traditional music transmission. ‘The west’ is re-constituted as central, with Miltown at the epicentre of that. Miltown’s identity is transformed into a location that continuously re-inscribes Irish music-making practices into its history as invocations of music-making extend far beyond its annual one-week duration.

If an alternative picture could be drawn, one might consider the equally erudite and iconic Dublin piper, Leo Rowsome, who died just a few years before Willie Clancy in 1970. One of the most important outcomes of the foundation

of the Dublin Piper's Club in 1900 is the proliferation and tradition of piping in Dublin that was, and still is, much stronger than that of west Clare. On that basis, one might assume that this makes a strong case for initiating a 'Leo Rowsome Summer School' in Dublin. But the capital city, with its urban backdrop of commerce and materialism, represents the face of a nationalised tradition. In contrast to the strongly imagined roots of this music practice in the rural and, more particularly, in the west of Ireland. Situating a comparable school in Dublin has the potential to advance the process of de-traditionalisation.³¹

The idealisation of the west as a cultural heartland is a legacy reiterated by the Gaelic Revivalists who imagined the pure, native landscape of the west of Ireland as representing the Irish nation prior to its Anglicisation. This equation of rurality with true Irishness re-imagines a village like Miltown as a place apart, a haven from modern industrialised society. In reality, factors such as Miltown's inadequate transport connections and infrastructural deficits should mitigate against the success of locating the school there. However, these factors add to a romantic construction of the area in which a traditional Irish culture and way of life survives that contrasts sharply with urban life. The village-level size of Miltown represents a refuge from the hectic pace of everyday life, from which it is imagined to be distanced both spatially and temporally. The traditionalising musical narrative of County Clare has developed within this myth of the west. It is a narrative that advanced in particular from the 1940s onwards with the increasing attention of collectors such as Séamus Ennis, Ciarán Mac Mathúna and later, Tom Munnelly.³² The county of Clare itself creates a symbolic boundary easily defined geographically and within which the functional status of Irish traditional music is elevated further. The musicianship and personal life story of Willie Clancy solidifies this narrative, which then supports and resounds within the teaching framework of the school and confers cultural authority onto all aspects of the Willie Clancy Week.

Willie Clancy's efforts to concretise the musical legacy of this west Clare community through recovering aesthetic references to Garrett Barry, established a pedigree that was re-sounded by the senior west Clare fiddle players in the opening years of the school. Drawing on McCann, Bohlman makes the point that 'the centre is not a permanent, unchanging place, rather one that dynamically takes shape and undergoes constant change.'³³ So when this particular cohort of elderly gate-keepers passed away, the school continued to grow and expand, and new gate-keepers emerged. With its own west Clare pedigree firmly and centrally established, the school is in a position to negotiate a space in which

other peripheral and local styles can be celebrated. Notably in 1995 an east Clare fiddle workshop was introduced, but more generally, this is now demonstrated by the countrywide and indeed diasporic provenance of the school's tutors. These new inheritors of the 'masters of tradition' status continue to tap into the authority of tradition, and thus appropriate it in order to legitimate their own cultural authority. Throughout each decade of the school, particular attention is paid to the current elder-statesmen of tradition, regardless of their provenance, and their role as important storehouses of indigenous knowledge is privileged. This particular concept is enshrined at the fiddle section of the school in the Archive Room. Situated within the fiddle school, the Archive Room provides a space in which more senior musicians, who no longer teach for the entire week, perform for groups of classes who are invited in during the morning. The activities of the room were initially recorded by the Irish Traditional Music Archive (hence its name). In the last few years, John Joe Tuttle, a west Clare fiddle player and therefore a true local is a mainstay of this room, as is Leitrim musician and elder statesman of Irish music, Ben Lennon, who previously taught for many years at the school.

Other week-long summer schools of Irish music, inspired by the Willie Clancy model, are now claiming, reclaiming and re-traditionalising music-makers and music-practices of their own areas. Continuing throughout the summer, some provide a quieter haven from the intensity of the Willie Clancy Week, but notably nearly all of them are also located along the western seaboard.³⁴ The school which bears the most resemblance to the Willie Clancy Week, at least in terms of structure and number of students attending workshops, is the annual Scoil Éigse, a week-long Comhaltas sponsored school directly preceding Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann. Scoil Éigse like the Fleadh itself is a moveable feast and is located in whichever town the Fleadh is taking place in any given year. Whilst both schools attract some overlapping constituencies, Scoil Éigse does not attract the same coterie of annual pilgrims who faithfully attend the Willie Clancy Week. Due to the temporality of Scoil Éigse's location, which shifts every two to three years, in accordance with the Fleadh mobility, its roots remain shallow. The anonymity of Scoil Éigse fails to enunciate the specific response to individual and collective desire engendered by the man himself, Willie Clancy, and it lacks the focus conveyed by his name. The locational gravitas of ritual repetition is absent, and as a result, its social capital is lower. The Willie Clancy Week, which has just celebrated its fortieth year, has garnered an enduring reputation and an unprecedented allegiance amongst the community of practice

of Irish traditional music. In comparison, Scoil Éigse's minstrelsy prevents it from acquiring locational gravitas. Due to its location in a town or city large enough to accommodate the Fleadh, its masters and apprentices are unable to colonise spaces in the manner in which Miltown is entirely colonised by the sounds and sights of Irish traditional musicians during the Willie Clancy Week.

Conclusion

Privileging 'the local' is a constitutive feature of the Willie Clancy Week and an alternative to the nationalising narratives attributed to Comhaltas. The school offers a continuum of creative renewal and a dynamic tradition of both taking up and handing down of culture. The process of re-traditionalisation at the Willie Clancy Summer School, draws on stocks of cultural, social and symbolic capital which are held and reinvested in Miltown every year. These stocks are built on a cultural authority, which in turn is predicated on the symbolic significance of the authority of tradition residing in the peripheral location of Miltown Malbay on the west coast of County Clare. John O'Flynn reiterates Adorno's assertion that 'all aspects of music production and consumption are socially mediated' and draws renewed attention to the concept of nostalgia for the west and the importance of place in constructions of musical authenticity.³⁵ As the Willie Clancy Week inverts and subverts the periphery-centre dialectic, the school continues to both lead and reflect musical dynamics as it weaves its way through the fabric of Irish music communities and relationships worldwide.